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AUTHOR	Egelson, Paula; Robertson, Cynthia; Smith, Scott; Hood, Art
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ABSTRACT

Senior Project is a culminating assessment for 12th graders that determines what they know and can do as they prepare to graduate from high school in North Carolina. It consists of a research paper on an approved topic of the student's choice, a product and portfolio related to the paper, and a presentation before a review panel of community members. The North Carolina State Board of Education and the North Carolina State Department of Public Education wanted to determine how many high schools were either implementing or considering implementing Senior Project, so a survey was developed by staff at SERVE and sent to the principal of every public high school, including charter schools and alternative high schools, in the state. Responses were received from 330 schools (response rate of 81%). Nearly half of the state's schools are either implementing Senior Project (32%) or considering implementation (14%). Most implementing schools expect all seniors to participate, with accommodations for special needs students. Schools that did not implement Senior Project cited school focus, lack of support, lack of time and resources, and previous implementation issues as the usual reasons. Schools implementing Senior Project tended to be small to medium sized. Schools implementing Senior Project and those planning to implement the project do so for the same reasons: to teach and reinforce skills, to serve as a transition from high school to work or college, to raise school standards, and to motivate students. (SLD)

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Results of a State-wide Secondary Culminating Performance Assessment Survey

by

Paula Egelson, SERVE

Cynthia Robertson, SERVE

Scott Smith, Florida State University School

Art Hood, SERVE

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Background

Senior Project is a culminating assessment for 12th graders that determines what they know and can do as they prepare to graduate from high school. It consists of a research paper on an approved topic of the student's choice, a product and portfolio related to the research paper, and a presentation before a review panel of community members. Senior Project incorporates the skills of researching, writing, presenting, planning, decision-making and time management. It showcases student skills, introduces students to the community, and prepares students for college or the workplace.

A student selects a topic that is both a personal area of interest and a learning stretch; a school committee then approves the topic. Students complete an eight- to fifteen-page research paper that includes primary and secondary sources. They develop a related product or project that requires a minimum of least 15 hours of work. They create a portfolio that reflects the Senior Project process and includes entries on their mentoring experiences and product development. Most Senior Project programs have a strong mentoring component, and teachers and community members serve in this capacity. Students' speeches are based on their papers and products, and are usually seven to 10 minutes in length. At every step of the way, students are provided with program guidelines and support. Students are assessed on every component of Senior Project; they also have numerous opportunities to critique their own work.

As part of SERVE 's research in the areas of student assessment and school reform, we have supported secondary educators and school district administrators from

across the Southeast in creating and implementing Senior Project programs since 1994,when the SERVE Senior Project Network was created. This assistance has taken the form of training opportunities and yearly institutes, seed money to schools, SERVE videos and publications to promote awareness and to strengthen skills, yearly Senior Project coordinator networking meetings, and visits to school sites to collect data and be a part of Senior Boards.

The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) and the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (DPI) wanted to determine how many high schools were either implementing or considering implementing Senior Project. Both groups had supported the concept of Senior Project and encouraged high schools to implement the program. The state had also provided scholarship funding for schools to send staff to Senior Project training. To address the question, a survey was developed by SERVE staff and representatives from DPI and the SBE. In early March of 2002, the survey was mailed to the principal of every public high school (including charter and alternative high schools) in the state. The survey sought to answer four major questions:

1. *Which high schools are implementing Senior Project?*
2. *Why are some schools implementing Senior Project and others are not?*
3. *What are the components of the state's Senior Project programs?*
4. *Is Senior Project a graduation requirement in participating schools?*

Perspective

There has been a growing concern nationally about the degree to which the high school experience prepares students for life after graduation. Ernest Boyer, in his book *High School*, stated that strengthening traditional high school courses was not enough to connect students to the world of work or higher education. A new vision was needed to join the disciplines to the real world. Ted Sizer (1992) also established the need to integrate the secondary curriculum and for students to participate in a Graduation by Exhibition to demonstrate what they knew and what they could do. Jacqueline Ancess and Linda Darling-Hammond (1993) wrote about the need to associate the academic and the vocational at the secondary level and extend students' knowledge and skills in both areas.

These concerns, and others, were highlighted in two reports published recently by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001, 2001). The purpose of the commission was to closely examine students' experiences in the last year of high school and recommend ways to improve them. The reports outlined the commission's findings and recommended ways to make the senior year more rigorous and productive. Its findings included:

- Educators' low expectations devastate life chances for many students
- The high school senior year too often represents a lost opportunity to link students with either postsecondary studies or work

- Exit exams are administered prior to the senior year and typically cover content drawn from the ninth or tenth grade curriculum. Once passed, students have little incentive to continue to take schoolwork seriously

Its recommendations included:

- Reshape the senior year to ease students' transition from high school to postsecondary education and the world of work
- Provide options for service- and work-based-learning for credit
- Require a senior project demonstrating a student's capabilities for research, creative thinking, rigorous analysis, and clear written and oral communication

Senior Project addresses these findings and provides a means for implementing the recommendations. There are a variety of benefits associated with Senior Project. It often becomes a self-evaluation activity for schools. That is, by analyzing Senior Project student work, educators can upgrade their school programs so students will be more adequately prepared for their postsecondary experiences. Participating students have acquired new skills—especially planning, research, writing, speaking, time management, work-related, and interpersonal—and more self-confidence (Bond, S., Egelson, P., Harman, P., and Harman, S., 2002). Many have developed more focused career plans (ibid)—their Senior Projects having allowed them to confirm or reject tentative career paths—and some have been offered scholarships or jobs. Graduation from a Senior Project school may also positively impact a student's chances of being accepted to the more selective institutions of higher education (Taafe, 2001).

Methods

The Senior Project survey comprised eight questions. Seven of the eight questions were forced-response items; one allowed an open-ended response. In most cases, choices were given, and respondents were asked to "check all that apply." Additionally, if the response to the question made the next question(s) irrelevant, the respondent was asked to skip those questions.

Data sources

Surveys, accompanied by a letter from the Chairman of the State Board of Education, were mailed to every public high school in the state (including charter and alternative schools) in March 2002. A total of 407 schools received surveys. The initial return rate was 50%. Two rounds of follow-up calls to principals took place in late April and early May. The final return rate was 81%, for a total of 330 surveys returned.

Results

1. *Which high schools are implementing Senior Project?*

   Nearly half of all the state's high schools are either implementing Senior Project (32%) or considering implementation (14%). Most schools that have implemented Senior Project or are planning to implement Senior Project expect all seniors to participate. Adaptations and accommodations are made for special needs students. In some schools, Advanced Placement students were exempt from Senior Project, and in another school, only students enrolled in a particular program participated

in Senior Project. The breakout of the size of the Senior Project schools is as follows:

- 0 to 100 seniors: 23% (N=24)
- 101 to 250 seniors: 49% (N=51)
- 251 to 500 seniors: 27% (N=28)
- 501 to 750 seniors: 1% (N=1)

2. *Why are some schools implementing Senior Project and others are not?*

Reasons Given for Choosing to Implement Senior Project:

The list below combines responses that Senior Project schools (N=104) and those considering implementing a Senior Project program (N=48) selected about why they chose or would choose Senior Project for their school. Both Senior Project schools and those considering Senior Project selected the same top four choices from responses listed on the survey in the same order and with similar frequency:

1. Teach and reinforce skills; 74% (N=113)
2. Serve as transition; 66% (N=101)
3. Raise school standards; 59% (N=90)
4. Motivate students; 50% (N=76)
5. Cure for senioritis; 24% (N=36)

Reasons Why Some High Schools Are Not Implementing Senior Project:

Schools that are not implementing Senior Project responded in a variety of ways to the question of why they have chosen not to implement Senior Project. The responses were grouped into the following categories:

1. School focus
2. Lack of support
3. Time and resources
4. Previous implementation issues

3. *What are the components of the state's Senior Project programs?*

Most Senior Project programs include four components. They are: a research paper, a related product, a portfolio, and a presentation. Most Senior Project schools require all four components. Some schools customize their Senior Project program to include other components, such as autobiographies, senior scrapbook, community service, or job shadowing. Representatives from Senior Project schools reported that they required:

- One Component: 6 % (N=6)
- Two Components: 2% (N=2)
- Three Components: 19% (N=20)
- Four Components: 57% (N=59)
- More than Four Components: 13% (N=14)
- No Answer: 3% (N=3)

4. *Is Senior Project a graduation requirement in participating schools?*

Sixty-six percent of the Senior Project schools responded that it is a graduation requirement. However, it is important to note that this number could be greater because general graduation requirements and senior English class requirements were not delineated; yet Senior Project is housed in most English departments (88%, (N=92)), and senior English is a state graduation requirement. If passing Senior Project is required to pass senior English, Senior Project becomes a de facto graduation requirement.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it appears that the majority of schools implementing or planning to implement Senior Project are small to medium-sized (0 –100 seniors; 101 –205 seniors). A majority of Senior Project schools (57%) require the four components. To a large extent, both Senior Project schools and those planning to implement the program do so for the same reasons: to teach and reinforce skills, to serve as a transition from high school to work or university, to raise school standards, and to motivate students.

Schools currently participating in Senior Project programs in North Carolina include all seniors. For example, relatively equal numbers of students are taking Senior Project from college prep, tech prep, and advanced placement programs. Schools that are not implementing Senior Project choose not to do so because it's not an area of focus for the school, there isn't support for it, and/or there aren't the necessary resources.

There are three areas of significance associated with the study. 1) Nearly half of the high schools in the state are voluntarily implementing or considering implementing Senior Project. Almost one third of the schools responding to the survey are already implementing the program, while another 14% are considering implementing it and only 31% of those cite the possibility of a state mandated program as a reason. This reveals considerable support for a non-traditional, non-"paper-and-pencil test" graduation requirement. These results can help inform states' educational policy discussions about exit examinations and graduation requirements. 2) The results also reveal a high level of interest among many high schools in raising their standards. 3) Finally, the survey results show a significant number of high schools taking steps to address recommendations of the National Commission on the High School Senior Year and better prepare their students to make the transition from high school to the world of work and higher education.

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Signature: Art Hood (Paula Egelson, Cynthia Robertson, Scott Smith)	Printed Name/Position/Title: SERVE Art Hood, Research Specialist
Organization/Address: SERVE, PO Box 5367, Greensboro, NC 27435	Telephone: 336-315-7400 FAX: 336-315-7457
	E-Mail Address: ahood@serve.org Date: 5/5/03

Paula Egelson, SERVE Program Director
Cynthia Robertson, SERVE Senior Program Specialist
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